

The Bodhi Tree – Symbol of the Enlightenment of Buddha

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Abstract

The Bodhi Tree, identified in Buddhist tradition with *Ficus religiosa*, occupies a central place in religious history. Most famously associated with the enlightenment of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha who sat beneath this tree to achieve Buddhahood, the tree has come to represent compassion, awakening, liberation, and spiritual continuity. Its significance extends across cultures and regions, where it is linked to moral transformation, sacred geography, and religious continuity. This article examines the Bodhi Tree from textual, historical, archaeological, and botanical perspectives, describing its role in Buddhism, pilgrimage, and material lineage.

Key words: Bodhi Tree; Shakyamuni Buddha; Bodh Gaya; Pilgrimage; Buddhist Archaeology; Monk Xuanzang; Religious Symbolism; Thousands of Buddhas; Big Mercy

Introduction

The Bodhi Tree (Figure 1), a sacred fig tree (*Ficus religiosa*), is one of the most enduring symbols in Buddhist tradition. Shakyamuni Buddha was named Siddhartha Gautama by his parents at birth. According to canonical and later Buddhist accounts, Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment beneath this tree in his

thirties. This event marked his transformation into the Buddha, the “Awakened One,” and established the Bodhi Tree as a powerful emblem of spiritual realization. The place where the Buddha achieved Buddhahood is named as “Bodh-Path Field” in Avatamsaka Sutra, and called as Bodh Gaya in Pali and Sanskrit languages meaning “the place of awakening”.



Figure 1: The Bodhi Tree in Bodhi Gaya, Indian. Bodhi meaning “awakening” or “enlightenment” in both Sanskrit and Pali languages. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

For thousands of years, the Bodhi Tree has served as a focal point of devotion, artistic representation, pilgrimage, and historical memory. Its significance also lies in its alleged botanical continuity. Buddhist communities historically propagated descendant trees through cuttings and transplantation, creating a lineage of sacred trees across Asia and the rest of the world. Collectively, these descendant trees are also called Bodhi trees. They reflect the geographical spread of peace and Buddhist devotion, as well as the preservation of a sacred lineage through living organisms.

In Buddhist cosmology, multiple Buddhas appear across different cosmic ages, or *kalpas*. The word **kalpa** in Buddhism and Hinduism refers to a cycle. According to Shakyamuni Buddha, the world passes through four stages: formation, existence, destruction, and emptiness. One complete cycle of these stages is called one kalpa. Our current cycle is called the Sage Kalpa, because more than a thousand sages—the 1,005 Buddhas—are said to appear during this period. According to Xuanzang (also translated as Xuan Zang, Tang Monk or Tang Tripitaka), a famous monk of the Tang Dynasty, 0.35 billion years is roughly equal to half of a xiaojie (a

smaller kalpa unit). The world has 20 **xiaojie** in its stable stage, which is about one quarter of a kalpa. Thus, one kalpa equals: $0.35 \times 2 \times 20 \times 4 = 28$ billion Earth Years.

Some scholars estimate that 4–5 billion years could be equal to half a **xiaojie**. After this interval, Maitreya Buddha will become the next Buddha. Maitreya (Laughing Buddha, Figure 2) has already attained a high level of enlightenment; because he wishes his world to be pure and free from the impurities of the human mind, this purification takes time, becoming true after half a **xiaojie**. In large scale Buddhist cosmology, kalpas are used to measure time rather than years that are based on celestial bodies such as the Sun, Venus, and the Moon and are unsuitable for vast spans. According to Buddhist sutras, the Sun was formed after the Earth (Qishi Sutra); in this kalpa the stars surrounding us also came into being later according to Big-Collection Sutra (Daji Jing). Scientifically, the rotation speed of a reference point such as the Sun, Moon, or Venus can change over cosmic timescales. Thus, using kalpa is more accurate to measure cosmic time rather than years.



Figure 2: The status of Maitreya (Laughing Buddha). Maitreya is a Bodhisattva who already attained a high level of enlightenment. Maitreya will become the 5th Buddha in this kalpa. The 10th-century Chinese Zen monk, Budai, had big stomach and always kept laughing. Its status is called Laughing Buddha because he was deemed as the incarnation of Maitreya – his jovial expression and a large belly are symbols of contentment, abundance, and the infinite capacity to bear the world's suffering with a smile.

In this kalpa, 1,005 Buddhas will appear, and each will be associated with a Bodhi tree under which enlightenment is attained. Shakyamuni Buddha is the fourth Buddha of the kalpa. Before him, there were several pre-historical events (Table 1): Krakucchanda Buddha became the first Buddha in this kalpa. In his dates, human's life expectation is forty thousand years and he attained enlightenment under the No-Worry tree. Kanakamuni Buddha was the sec-

ond Buddha. In his dates, human's life expectation is thirty thousand years and he attained enlightenment under the Youtan tree. Kāśyapa Buddha was the third Buddha. In his dates, human's life expectation is twenty thousand years and he attained enlightenment under the Suotuo tree. Moreover, our world is just a small part of a huge world system [1]. According to Buddhism (Qishi Jing – World Formation Sutra), there are billions of earths in Three-Thousand-

World (a huge world system) and billions of Bodhi Gaya, where each Buddha achieves Buddhahood under a Bodhi tree. While the species may vary across different Buddha's eras and planets, the

symbolic function remains consistent: the Bodhi Tree signifies awakening, spiritual endurance, and the possibility of liberation.

Table 1: The names of Bodhi Trees for the first three Buddhas who showed up in this kalpa in our world before Shakyamuni Buddha. At their time, the human's lifespans were much longer than currently.

Buddha	Lifespan	Name of Bodhi Tree
Krakucchanda	40,000 years	NoWorry tree
Kanakamuni	30,000 years	Youtan tree
Kāśyapa	20,000 years	Suotuo tree

After Kāśyapa Buddha, human impurity increased and lifespans shortened. According to the *Qishi Sutra*, early humans were born from a high-level heaven (Guangyin Tian) and shone with glorious light, allowing them to survive without sunlight. Greed, hatred, and ignorance—called the *Three Poisons*—caused lifespans to decline. Eighty thousand years marks a transition; when lifespans of human fall below this, the world is termed a “five impurity world,” reflecting corrupt conditions, wrong views, intense greed/anger/delusion, decline of sentient beings, and shorter lives. When lifespans dropped below 20 thousand years, the world entered a Dark Age strongly influenced by the five impurities.

The *Merciful Lotus Sutra* relates a past event in a far ancient previous kalpa, the “Good holing Kapla [2,3]” when many people made wishes before Treasure Light Buddha to become Buddhas. Among those elites, 1,005 Bodhisattvas made wishes to become the 1005 Buddhas in the Sage Kalpa. Nonetheless, no body wished to attain Buddhahood during the Dark Age in the Sage Kalpa, except Shakyamuni Buddha, whose name at that time was *Treasure Ocean* (Baohai). He was the last one that was making the wishes. He worried about persons who will suffer during this Dark Age. In order to save sentient beings in the darkest age, he vowed to become Shakyamuni Buddha when human lifespan was only 120 years. To demonstrate how quickly life passes, he wished to give up one third of his own lifespan; consequently, he lived only into his eighties as the Shakyamuni Buddha, fulfilling his oath. From that moment, Baohai was called “*Big Mercy Bodhisattva*” until he attained Buddhahood under his Bodhi tree.

In some traditions, trees linked to eminent figures are also called Bodhi trees. For example, the tree at today's *Taer Temple*, where the Tibetan master Tsongkapa was born, is referred to as a Bodhi tree. Botanically, their longevity depends on species traits, environment, disease, and human care.

In addition to a physical tree, some dharma practices also speak of a “Buddha tree” as a metaphor for the teachings. For example, their basic teaching is like the root of the Bodhi tree and their achievements will be like the flower and fruit of Bodhi tree. It is worth noting that the Bodhi Tree *Ficus religiosa* does not produce edible fruit. Its flowers are almost invisible because they develop inside the fruit, which is why the fig is called a “no flower fruit” in

many Asian languages. Unlike cultivated figs grown for edible fruit, the Bodhi tree allocates minimal energy to reproduction, allowing it to persist for very long periods.

This article focuses on the Bodhi tree (***Ficus religiosa***) of Shakyamuni Buddha. In Buddhism traditions, Bodhi trees associated with Buddhas are regarded as sacred objects carrying spiritual blessings and religious memory. Even though different species and stories are involved, the authentic Bodhi trees associated with the real Buddhas share the common characteristics: when undisturbed from external factors, they can theoretically survive indefinitely under the Buddha's blessing and continue to bestow blessings on people. To date, the oldest known Bodhi tree has lived for nearly 2400 years and remains evergreen. The Jakarta Sutra tells a story of a wheel rotating emperor (a king with a flying “UFO like” wheel) who, as a previous life of the famous Monk Ananda, offered reverence to the Bodhi tree of a Buddha who had entered nirvāṇa millennia earlier. Moreover, the Bodhi tree is physiologically stronger than many other trees; when ***Ficus religiosa*** is planted near a Kopok cotton tree, the Bodhi tree can outgrow and eventually covered the whole sky, and this will cause the latter to die without getting sunlight for photosynthesis.

Living Lineage and Propagation

The Bodhi tree can reproduce by seed or by vegetative propagation (cutting a healthy branch below a node, rooting it in moist soil or water, then transplanting). For religious purposes, propagation is always vegetative. From a botanical standpoint, vegetative propagation preserves genetic identity, whereas seed reproduction introduces variation through sexual recombination. This distinction supports the sacred claim of continuity; descendant trees thus function as both living memorials and religious extensions of the original site.

Several sites are especially important in the trans regional history of the Bodhi tree. In India, the original Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya was destroyed several times but later re-planted. The current Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya was replanted in 1870 and now reaches about 20 m in height. In, Sri Lanka, the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi at Anuradhapura is traditionally a sapling brought from Bodh Gaya in the third century at 288 BC and is among the world's oldest historically doc-

umented trees (over 2,300 years old). Thus, the Sri Lankan Bodhi tree is the most ancient surviving specimen, having lived for nearly 2,400 years and remaining evergreen.

Additional descendant trees are maintained in monasteries and temples throughout Asian countries, and the United States. Notably,

the Bodhi tree in Florida (Florida Buddhism Vihara, Figure 3) descends directly from the Sri Lankan sapling and therefore *possesses the exact same genome* as the original tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. Regular light offerings are held there, bringing blessings to the local community.

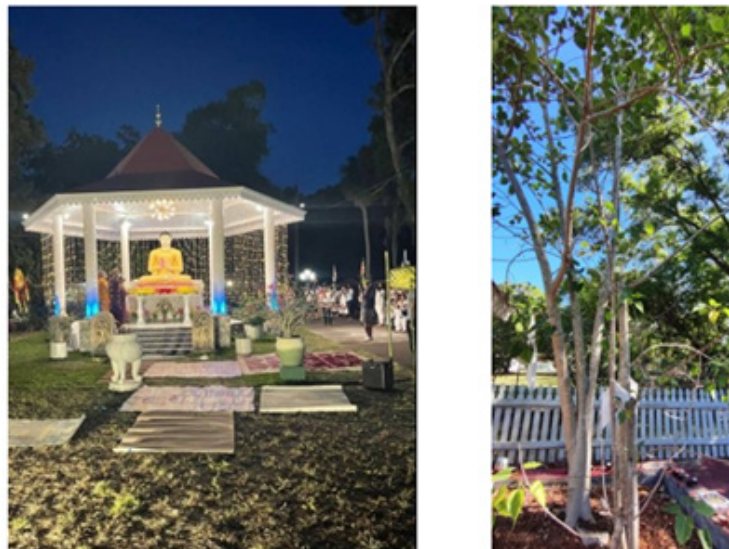


Figure 3: The Bodhi Tree in the temple of Florida Buddhism Vihara, Florida. The tree (right panel) was planted in this Sri Lanka temple behind the Buddha Status (left panel). It was said that the saplings were transplanted from the oldest Bodhi Tree, the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi Bodhi Tree in Sri Lanka. It is noteworthy that the Jaya Sir Maha Bodhi Tree was transplanted from the original Bodhi Tree in Bodhi Gaya and is the oldest “transplanted” tree in recorded history.

A famous Bodhi tree stands at the *Dharma Nature Temple* (nowaday’s Guang-xiao Temple) in the province of Canton, southern China (Figure 4). It was transplanted from Bodh Gaya in 502 CE. In 676 CE, the Zen master *Huineng* became a monk and preached super dharma beneath this tree. The tree lived for over 1,200 years and grew extremely high. During the ancient Song Dynasty, this

tree became one of eight wonders in Sheep City (current Guangzhou), Canton’s capital city. Unfortunately, it was blown down by Hurricane during the Tsunami in 1792 AD. The current tree was re-transplanted from its decent tree in Nanhua Temple, and still keeps evergreen.



Figure 4: The Bodhi Tree in the Dharma-Nature Temple, Canton. According to the scripts on stone under the tree (right panel), it was transplanted from the Bodhi Tree in Bodhi Gaya on 502 AD. Its sapling was brought by Tripitaka Master Zhiyao (Zhiyao: Wisdom Medicine; Tripitaka: the three categories of the Buddhist canon Sutras/teachings, Vinaya/discipline, and Abhidharma/philosophy). Zhiyao also predicted the Bodhisattva (Huineng) manifested in flesh body will preach super dharma under the Bodhi Tree.

Huineng's well known poem mentioning "Buddhi has no tree originally," reflects the philosophy of emptiness. Fifteen years later after he made this poem, he decided to become a monk under the Bodhi tree; this illustrates that the tree can serve as a skillful means rather than a literal obstruction to realization. His hair, trimmed

when he be-came a monk, is still kept in a tower at the temple (Figure 5). Later, he made another famous saying, "*Huineng has no tricks; he cannot stop all thoughts*," emphasizing that even a master cannot become a "nothing thing" like a stone—stones are empty but cannot become Buddhas.



Figure 5: The Hair Tower (Pagoda) in the Dharma-Nature Temple. According to the scripts on stone near the tower (right-bottom panel), it was built to memorize Huineng who became a monk and accepted Buddhist disciplines in 676 AD under the Bodhi Tree in this temple. The painting in the temple (right-upper panel) illustrated the image of Huineng before becoming a monk, who wear general layman clothes in his time when he joined the discussion of monks.

Symbolic Significance

Theravada Buddhism tradition holds that Siddhartha Gautama sat beneath the Bodhi tree resolved not to rise until he fully understood the nature of suffering and its cessation. Through meditation and mental discipline, he overcame temptation, doubt, and fear, attaining complete awakening by the end of the night. This moment is foundational in Buddhism: it not only signifies the Buddha's liberation but also frames the Bodhi tree as a symbol of insight, perseverance, and compassion. Pilgrims continue to visit the Bodhi tree and its descendant sites as acts of reverence and merit making.

It is noteworthy that, according to the Mahayana Buddhism, the Gautama Buddha (Shakyamuni) actually achieved Buddhahood a long, long time ago—before his historical life in India. In Mahayana scriptures, particularly the highly influential Lotus Sutra (specifically Chapter 16), the Buddha reveals a major secret: his attainment of enlightenment under the Bodhi tree in India was just a performance, a skillful show to inspire humanity. From any means, the Bodhi tree is a symbol of achieving enlightenment.

Archaeology

Archaeologically, the Bodhi tree has been pivotal in locating historical sites at Bodh Gaya. After the decline of Buddhism, barbarous rulers damaged many Buddhist monuments, turning them into ru-

ins. Centuries later, European scholars used Xuanzang's travel accounts—detailing temple layout, the presence of a Bodhi tree, and nearby rivers—to identify Bodh Gaya as the Buddha's sacred site [4]. The living Bodhi tree, the Book written by Monk Xuanzang and the ruins of early stupas provided essential clues. Today the temple complex at Bodh Gaya, the place of awakening, is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, though there are arguments about the Bodhi tree that was used to identify Bodh Gaya, since there is a lack of clear propagation records after Muslim conquer. Today, genetic testing comparing the genome with the known Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi are proposed to confirm the identity of the right tree, though it was impossible to do that in 19th century.

Discussion

In devotional practice, planting or offering, a Bodhi sapling is regarded as a meritorious act. Such offerings express faith and support future spiritual progress; the tree thus functions both as a symbol of the Buddha's achievement and as an object of ongoing religious aspiration.

The Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) as a central symbol of the Buddha's enlightenment, tracing its religious, historical, archaeological, and botanical significance. There are many literatures and psalms related to Bodhi tree. Below are several examples with religious

meanings and these examples will help audience to understand the feelings and meaning for the pilgrimage to Bodhi tree.

1. **Song of Bodhi Mountain:** lifting up eyes unto the Bodhi tree (for pilgrimage), thou-sands of knots tangled in mind are now released. Turning my gaze back upon the world, so many yes-or-no disputes, so many disasters, and so many interpersonal is-sues..... Wishing the Buddha's glorious light will wash away all the dusts and sufferings!
2. **Evergreen Bodhi Tree:** behold the Bodhi tree, in its verdant glory; it standeth in the place of the Great Elephant, where holiness abideth. Though the ages have passed away as a shadow, yet doth its leaf remain green, and its strength is not diminished. I lift up mine eyes in reverence unto the Tree, and from afar I behold the path that leadeth to my true home. Through many dawns and many eventides have I wandered, amidst the drifting clouds and the countless mists of this world. My feet have trodden the rough and stony places, yet my heart repenteth not; for I have not regret about the years of my life spent to pursue the true. I am facing thousands of worlds; from where I count the pros and cons as a human? Let my soul be transformed and become as the Bodhi; that I may shield all living souls and shine as a light unto all generations. Yea, I gaze upon the Tree and seek the ancient way; through the smoke of time and the labor of my days, I press toward the dwelling of my peace.
3. **Monk Xuanzang:** the book of "WESTERN AREA WRITING" volume 8 authored by the famous Xuanzang Monk in Tang Dynasty, "in midst of Bodhi tree, there is a Vajra Seat which came into being in early kalpa and formed together with the earth. It sits in the three thousand worlds, its bottom touching the gold wheel and its top pushing the borders of the earth. Made by Vajra, it has a circumference of a hundred steps. A thousand Buddha in bhadrakalpa (Sage Kalpa) have sat here and entered Vajra con-centration. Thus, it is called the Vajra Seat. This place

of enlightenment is also called the root path place....."

The poem by Dr. Sun during pilgrimage to the Budha Tree and performing meditation below the Bodhi Tree, "Under the emerald canopy of the beautiful Bodhi tree, where the Blessed Bodhisattva of Great Mercy dwelt in unshakable stillness, I lift my heart in humble supplication. As the morning star bore witness to his triumph over the legions of Mara, may his sacred blessing descend upon me, guiding my wandering feet along the path he has already trodden. For pure vision, gemstones in the tree reveal the past deeds of the Buddha of Great Mercy: in a former life, he severed his own flesh for the eagle, that a caught dove might be freed and take to the sky; in another birth, he offered his body to a starving tiger, so she would not turn her hunger toward her own cubs – this deed eliminated the negative karma accumulated over forty kalpas in past lives [5]; he sacrificed himself countless times performing such merciful deeds to achieve Buddhahood and save all beings. I keep crying for how extraordinarily merciful Shakyamuni Buddha is. May I, like him, achieved the Buddhahood and saved sentient beings. Grant me the wisdom to walk his compassionate road, that I may one day reach the shore of eternal peace, awaken from the dream of ages, and attain the crown of Buddhahood. May all sentient beings will achieve Buddhahood with everlasting peace and happiness!"

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